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Section 1: Introduction

Why Take This Course?

Do you ever wish you knew more about personal finance? No matter where you are in your financial journey, there always is more to learn. SAM's free online courses are not intended as financial advice, but as a starting point to raise awareness, to increase skills and knowledge related to personal finance, and to guide you to helpful resources.

Research shows that financial education is most effective when it is relevant to a decision you are faced with right now. This course covers:

- Introduction to the Life Transitions Road Map
- Strategies and checklists to help you make decisions during times of crisis and life transitions
- Resources to help in times of crisis and transition

Disclaimers

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What is a Life Transition?

Some things in life are certain: You and your family members will age and, as part of the normal flow of life, your needs will change and new obstacles will arise. Then there will be the inevitable surprises that you can't predict. You might not know for sure if something will happen, but you can assess the likelihood of certain events based on your lifestyle and family history.

What do life transitions have to do with personal finance? Quite a bit, actually. Regardless of your income, a change to your circumstances, planned or unplanned, can affect your financial situation radically. Even positive changes such as marriage or a job change can bring new challenges.

The Life Transitions Road Map and Crisis Checklists

This course introduces the **Life Transitions Road Map** as a way to work through your emotions, feelings, thoughts and observations about a crisis, and proactively face transitional events. **Crisis Checklists** are also included to help guide some of the actions you will need to take in certain transitions.

While we can't tell you exactly how to handle your specific circumstances, the Life Transitions Road Map and checklists can help you slow down, take a deep breath, and begin charting your actions.

You are encouraged to download the Life Transitions Road Map for a reference as you proceed through the course so you can practice with it before you face a big challenge or change.

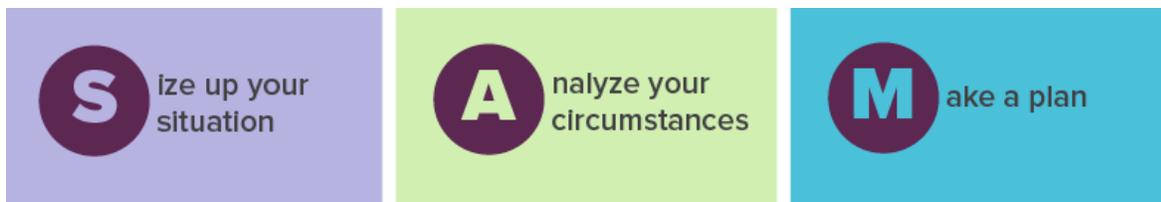
Navigating the Life Transitions Road Map

The Life Transitions Road Map guides you to identify your automatic, emotional reactions and prepare you to take action. Once you go through this course and use the map a few times, these steps might become part of your internal processing of any life-changing event.

You are encouraged to print out the **Life Transitions Road Map** and put it on your refrigerator, tack it to your office bulletin board or walk through it with a loved one who is facing a challenge of their own.

If you have taken other Smart About Money courses, you will notice that the map closely aligns to the typical SAM process:

- **S**ize up your situation
- **A**nalyze your circumstances
- **M**ake a plan



Feelings, Emotions and Thoughts

Emotions are physical responses. They are instinctive, which means they are triggered like your reflexes, and you don't do anything to bring them about. Emotions help you fight when you are in danger, defend yourself when you are threatened, cry when you are sad or laugh when you are happy.

Feelings result once you begin to think about a situation. Feelings describe our emotions.

Emotions happen in the body, while feelings form in the mind. When you take time to observe what your emotions feel like and describe the feelings in detail, you can step back from the chaos or panic of a sudden life transition, and begin to clarify what you need to move forward.

For example, if you just lost your job unexpectedly you might feel bitter, despairing, helpless or panicky. But your feelings will depend on your situation. What if you have wanted to quit for years, but never have found the courage to do it? Then losing your job might make you feel invigorated, free or relieved.

Transitions can happen at any time and they can signify welcome change or upheaval of the status quo, leaving you unsure of your next step. Regardless of the situation, your feelings likely depend on past experiences or what you've seen others do in similar events.

When the unexpected occurs, it's perfectly acceptable to take time for yourself before dealing with the adjustment. The first step is sorting through your emotions and feelings, including those you might not want to acknowledge.

How do you feel about this situation right now?

Monitor your self-talk.

Sort out your thoughts.

Acknowledge your feelings.



Changing Feelings

If you are in the early stages of a crisis or life transition, you might be feeling some pretty intense emotions. Reflect on your current situation or think about another time when you were dealing with a similar type of change. How did you feel when you first got the news?

Angry

Annoyed

Anxious

Bitter

Confident

Comforted

Crushed

Depressed

Despairing

Doubtful

Excited

Fearful

Free

Guilty

Happy

Helpless

Hopeless

Invigorated

Joyful

Nervous

Outraged

Panicked

Perplexed

Rejected

Relieved

Scared

Shocked

Triumphant



Did Your Feelings Change Over Time?

Feelings change during and after an event, even if it was a change you asked for. For example, if you were laid off from a job, you might have felt shocked or angry at first, but then later, when you got a new job, you might have felt relieved to be starting over.

Think about a time when you faced a major life transition or event in the past and focus on your feelings.

When I first found out about the life change, I felt _____.

In the process of the life change, I felt _____.

When I made the change I wanted, I felt _____.

Or

When I was unable to make the change I wanted, I felt _____.

Runaway Emotions

Thinking and feeling are not the same. Emotions are bodily reactions, like reflexes. These responses often arise spontaneously, and kick in when you need to react immediately, for example out of fear.

When you identify and describe your emotions accurately, you can think clearly about a way forward. In moments of high emotion (whether positive or negative):

1. Accept and acknowledge your emotions.
2. Pause and take a step back before making any critical decisions.
3. Avoid problem solving or trying to rationalize while experiencing your emotional response.

Working Through a Divorce

Working through their divorce, Miranda describes how she and her ex-husband moved beyond the emotional aspects to focus on their son and the financial impacts of the divorce.

“We essentially sat down and figured out what we wanted to have happen, and what would work out best for us in terms of dividing our stuff, getting us each established in new homes, how to handle our son’s living arrangements and other items.”

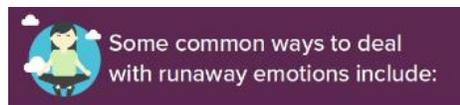
While they successfully worked their way through their finances without outside help, that’s not to say they were immune from the emotions that accompany the divorce process. There was hurt and pain, but they combatted these feelings with mutual respect.

“Even though I was hurt by my ex’s request for a divorce, I realized quickly that it was in both our interests to move forward and get established separately with minimum fuss,” Miranda says. “It’s less expensive, and it’s better for us and for our son. The key is being able to look at the long-term goals and find ways to ensure that everyone gets the best new start possible. In order to do that, I had to move beyond my hurt.”



Let Feelings Out

Let your emotions move through you and pay attention to the specific feeling words that best describe them.



- Identify your most common emotional reactions in times of stress and emotional highs and know when you need to step away from a situation.
- Count to 10 slowly before saying or doing anything.
- Breathe in and out slowly and deeply. Breathe in counting to four, hold for two counts, and then breathe out counting to six.
- Exercise to release endorphins and lower your stress levels associated with anger or to burn excess energy from an emotional high.
- Let yourself laugh uproariously, scream aloud or have a good cry.
- Seek prospective opportunities from the transition and be your own advocate. Both positive and negative transitions can bring about differing feelings. Look at the transition from a distance to see its potentials.
- Talk with others, especially trusted loved ones. Share your feelings and let them express theirs without trying to solve their problems; just listen. You may also wish to share your feelings with a trained counselor. Find out if your workplace offers counseling services through an Employee Assistance Program.
- Take breaks. Engage in your hobbies, spend time in nature, pray or meditate.

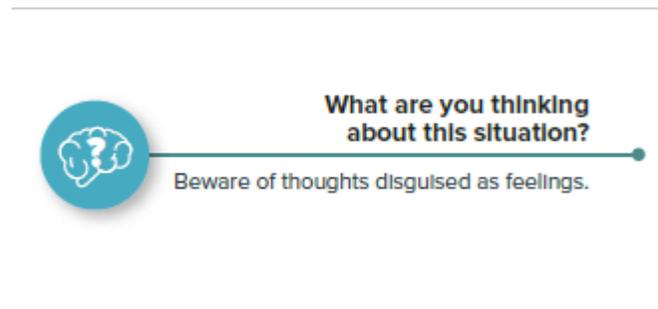
Thoughts

Your inner language and what you think to yourself is powerful. If you don't slow down and give yourself time to process a crisis or life transition, you risk making decisions you might regret.

It is important to separate feelings from thoughts. For example, "I feel neglected" or "I feel like no one cares" are not actually feelings. If you get caught up in feelings like being scared, jittery, angry or anxious, you might blame your uncomfortable feelings on other people or view everything in terms of worst-case scenarios.

When you say "I feel like no one cares," you might really be saying that you feel helpless. Instead of spinning your mental wheels and blaming the people around you for letting you down, you can get very clear about what it would take for you to feel comforted. And then you can tell your loved ones specifically what you need. Sometimes it's not that other people don't care, but simply that they don't know what they can do to support you.

This even applies in positive life events. For example, if you received a bonus at work, you might think "Yes! Now I can go out and buy that new watch that I've been wanting," or "Well, finally! I should have gotten this a long time ago!" Thinking that you can buy expensive material goods may really indicate a feeling of confidence but can lead to overspending. And, blaming others for not getting what you feel you deserved can mask feelings of resentment.



How Do You Know If It's a Feeling or a Thought?

It is not always easy to tell the difference between thoughts and feelings, especially since we often mix them up.

If it blames another person, it's probably a thought. Your feelings are your experience, and you have control over them. Not only is it counterproductive to blame others for your feelings, but it also puts the power to change in someone else's hands. Here are some examples of thoughts about others that masquerade as feelings:

- Judged
- Betrayed
- Taken for granted
- Ignored
- Neglected
- Belittled
- Attacked
- Threatened
- Bullied
- Inadequate
- Worthless

When you use words like these, which put the responsibility to change on the other person, you take away your own power. You actually might be feeling:

- Hurt
- Scared
- Sad
- Angry
- Frustrated
- Overwhelmed
- Confused
- Alone
- Hopeless
- Nervous

The difference is that the first set of words place the responsibility to change on someone else. For example, "I feel ignored by my boss, so I can't be happy until she starts paying more attention to me" puts all the power to change on your boss. Whereas, "I feel alone and sad" empowers you to find ways to treat your true feelings, regardless of your boss's behavior. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't talk to your boss about your feelings, but she will better understand what you really need if you own your experience.

Thoughts and Feelings about Combining Households

When you find yourself in a life transition, do you tend to think optimistically or pessimistically? A lot depends on the particular situation, and sometimes your thoughts may not pair with the expected response.

Consider the case of a dating couple who decides to move in together. Normally this would be a happy occasion, but there may be anxiety about combining household expenses, fear about disclosing private information such as debt amounts or credit histories, or excitement about the new opportunities.

Here are some potential thoughts disguised as feelings that might arise when a couple is combining finances.

Thought Described as Feeling	The Thought	The Possible Feeling	What You Might Really Want
I feel distrusted when you ask to see my credit card statement.	I think you don't trust me.	I feel hurt and disappointed.	I want to feel free to make my own money decisions without fear that you will judge me.
I feel motivated when you talk about decorating our place together.	I think you value my input.	I feel inspired.	I want us to participate together on major decisions.
I feel taken for granted when I am the one who always pays the bills.	I think you don't appreciate my effort to pay the bills.	I feel overwhelmed and tired.	I want you to notice my efforts and to help out in other ways (e.g., cook dinner) while I'm doing the bills.
I feel secure in our relationship.	I think you and I are in the same place in our relationship.	I feel committed.	I want to know that you are as committed to the relationship as I am.
I feel betrayed when you spend money without asking me.	I think you have betrayed me.	I feel suspicious and worried.	I want you to tell me if you need to spend more than we had budgeted so I am not caught off guard.

Separate Thoughts from Feelings

Take time to work through the thoughts and feelings you are having about your current life transition or event. Use this **Worksheet** to separate your thoughts from your feelings.

The Facts

Briefly describe the event or life transition. Resist the urge to include interpretations. Stick to the facts, for example, instead of, "I am going to be homeless and destitute," write only the facts, such as, "My landlord sent me a letter saying that I have to move out of my apartment in 30 days."

Feelings

Describe your feelings. Stick with emotion words (scared, excited, nervous) and steer clear of blaming statements such as abandoned, attacked, betrayed, which have more to do with another person than with your own emotions.

Thoughts

Write down the thoughts that you are having about this situation. What statements are repeating in your mind? What are you telling yourself?

What Do You Want?

Make a list of concrete things (actions, conversations, circumstances) that you want to see happen. Be as specific as possible. For example, instead of, "I want my friends to support me," you might say, "I would like to talk on the phone with Emily at least once a week."

What I Want to Happen	Who Can Help Me	Have I Told Them? (Y/N)

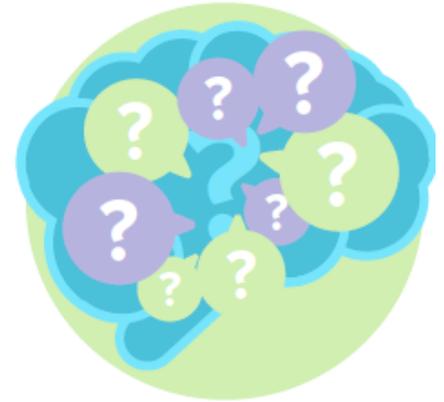
Looking over this list, prioritize these things from most important to least important. If you have not communicated to the person/people involved specifically what you need, return to this list when you are making your plan of action.

Size Up Your Self-Talk

Conversations you have with yourself also can influence your acceptance of events. Using positive inner language can help you come to terms with circumstances or to focus on solutions rather than worst-case scenarios.

You might not totally eliminate it, but there are ways to tone down negative self-talk:

- Avoid inflexible words and phrases like always, should have, or never.
- Treat your self-talk as a third person. If a friend were expressing these thoughts, what advice would you give them? Sometimes it helps to write your self-talk down or speak it aloud so that you can observe your thoughts more objectively.
- Combat negative thoughts with positive responses. For example, each time you notice yourself having a certain thought, such as “We will never be able to afford to buy a home,” you might think, “I don’t know how it will happen, but our perfect home is on the way.” (Of course, you will get there more quickly if you also take proactive actions toward this goal.)



Self-Talk Check

Take a moment to reflect on your thoughts and inner language using this checklist for areas related to financial fitness. Put a mark in each column when you assess your ability to engage in the financial activity listed (you can check more than one column):

When I think about my ability to ...	I Have Optimistic Thoughts	I Have Pessimistic Thoughts	I Use Positive Self-Talk	I Use Negative Self-Talk
Pay monthly bills				
Control spending				
Set realistic financial goals				
Save money for future spending				
Save for retirement				
Pay down or pay off debt				
Protect myself with insurance				
Invest for the future				

Now look at the number of times you checked each column. What does this tell you about your inner thoughts and self-talk related to financial goals? How do you think this influences your actions?

What Are You Observing?

When you experience a transition, your preconceptions and emotions can cloud how you interpret events. Do distractions or biases influence the information you take in?

For example, you may be angry if your elderly parents are victims of fraud. It might be easy to blame them for their lack of security or blind trust of outsiders, but how precise are your observations, especially when you are in an emotional state? Were there any warning signs you missed?

When a major event happens, do your best to separate facts from interpretations and pay attention to other people's reactions, even if they are not verbalized. How people respond to change depends on their backgrounds and experiences. Children, in particular, are strongly influenced by what they witness in adults.

Become a Better Observer

You don't need to be a detective to be a better observer. Practicing your observation skills will help.

1. **Get out of your head.** Focus on what is really going on, without interpretations, judgments or internal comments.
2. **Manage your distractions.** Turn off the technology and really take in the situation.
3. **Engage all of your senses.** Be specific as you note what you are seeing and hearing.
4. **Take notes.** Pay attention to body language and nonverbal cues.
5. **Think about what you're not observing.** What or who is missing? What's not being said?

Caution! Observe Without Interpretation

Focus only on what you are actually observing, hearing and sensing. Resist the urge to interpret or make judgments. For example, "I see that my brother didn't care about Mom, so he shouldn't get any inheritance," is a judgment, but "I see that my brother didn't visit Mom in the nursing home for two years," is an observation.

What are you observing about this situation?

What are you seeing?

What are you hearing?

What are you sensing?



Section 3: Analyze Your Circumstances

Who is in Your Circle of Influence?

You may be aware of your surroundings and your own physical and mental state, but most life transitions affect other people as well. Depending on the circumstance, you may need to get input from others, or consider how others will be impacted by decisions.

Keep in mind that not all advice is worth taking. It can be useful to hear what others in similar situations have done, but be careful about blindly following others' lead, especially when you are in a fragile emotional state.



**Evaluate your circle
of influence.**

Primary and Secondary Influencers

You probably have some people in your life with whom you are closer than others. And, depending on the life event, crisis or transition, your circle of influence might change. For example, if your brother is a lawyer then you might feel comfortable going to him with a legal question, but not as comfortable asking him about your medical issues.

Primary influencers often include your spouse or partner, parents, children, siblings and close friends. Secondary influencers could include social and religious groups, extended relatives or co-workers.

If you were faced with the following life events and transitions, who in your life would be your primary and secondary influencers?

- Death of a close relative or friend
- Marriage or divorce
- Changing jobs, retiring or taking leave from work
- A serious medical diagnosis
- Discovering that you need to move out of state

Research Potential Help

Once you have worked through your initial emotions, separated your thoughts from your feelings, and observed the circumstances free from judgment, you can start to assess your resources. In addition to your personal network, look for resources online and in your local area.

- Research support groups, associations and online communities.
- Visit a local library, community center or other help organization.
- Do a web search for your situation + “help” or “resources.” (e.g. “Death of a spouse resources”)
- Call 2-1-1 and research your city, county and state government websites.
- Contact your employer’s human resources department and find out if you are eligible for employee assistance program (EAP) services.

My Help List

Start by brainstorming specific things that would ease your stress or manage your to-do list during an event or transition. Your list might be very high level (e.g., “I need someone to help me figure out Mom’s end-of-life care strategy”), or your list could be immediate (e.g., I need someone to pick up the kids from school this week”).

What I Need	Who Has Offered	Confirmed (Y/N)	Others I Could Ask	Confirmed (Y/N)

Dealing with Conflict

As mentioned earlier in this course, it is difficult to think clearly when you are experiencing strong emotions. Likewise, it can be difficult to resolve conflict that arises during a transition.

Conflict, both internal and external, can occur when you are so attached to an outcome that you become rigid or inflexible. If others also refuse to compromise, you can end up escalating a small disagreement into a deep bitterness that overshadows your relationship for months or even years. To help reduce conflict around a major event:



1. **Check for understanding by all parties.** Assumptions can lead to false expectations and disappointments when they are not fulfilled.
2. **Listen without judgment.** Sometimes people simply need to be heard. Ask questions to clarify that you understand another's perspective.
3. **Control your expectations and emotions.** Others may be incapable of doing this, but control yourself and do not take outbursts personally.
4. **Be open to alternative viewpoints.** Taking an all-or-nothing approach puts everyone on the defensive.

Consider Others' Needs

Keep in mind that others see the situation through their own unique lenses, which may differ drastically from your own. What are the non-negotiables of others in your circle of influence? For example, if you suddenly needed to move from your current home, your daughter might have a bottom line that she needs to finish her senior year of high school in her current school district, or your spouse might have a bottom line that he or she must be able to commute to work in less than an hour. Weigh the wants and needs of others in your circle to look for solutions that might not please everyone, but at least everyone can live with.

	My non-negotiables	Their non-negotiables
<i>Primary Influencers</i>		
<i>Secondary Influencers</i>		

Predict Your Future

There are some life events for which you can prepare, and others that flabbergast you. How you handle unexpected circumstances can depend on prior preparations. But, what can you really plan for in your life?

Planning for life's circumstances depends on how well you can anticipate the future. There are sure to be some events you know will happen; others may surprise you. Use this worksheet to assess what could happen in your future. What about those events not listed?

Life Event	Likely to happen in less than 3 years	Likely to happen in 3 to 5 years	Likely to happen in 5 to 10 years	Likely to happen in more than 10 years	Not likely to happen
Addition to family					
Move back home (or adult child moves back in with you)					
Taking care of elderly person					
Moving in with roommates or a significant other					
Marriage or partnership					
Divorce or splitting apart					
Natural event (e.g., tornado, hurricane or flood)					
Identity theft					
Health change					
Death in extended family					
Job change					

Job benefits change					
Retirement or suspension in work					
Purchase a new home					
Moving to a different residence					
Foreclosure on home or repossession of vehicle					
Purchase a vehicle					
New driver in your household					
Health care coverage change					
Disability					
Death in immediate family or self					
Hospitalization					
Deployment					
Incarceration					

Potential Scenarios: What if You Do Nothing?

Sometimes the shock and stress of an unexpected event can put you in panic mode. There are situations where you really must act in the moment – for example, if you are having a heart attack or your house is on fire. There are other situations that might trigger intense feelings and thoughts that you believe you must respond to quickly, but that really don't require immediate action. And, in fact, you might do more harm than good if you act without first having all necessary information.



Consider alternative scenarios.

What would happen if you do nothing?

What is your best-case scenario?

What is your worst-case scenario?

A Mother's Story

When their son was diagnosed with autism, Kim and her husband not only had to process the shock and fear over what this would mean for their family, but they also had to deal with other people's reactions.

"People told me that I had to take action immediately — and that if I didn't, my son would be permanently damaged, and it would all be my fault," Kim says. "Thankfully, I allowed myself time to recover from the shock, and to get my bearings."

Now Kim counsels other parents in similar situations to step back and assess their options before jumping to conclusions.

"If you don't give yourself time to adjust to the new circumstances, you can wear yourself out with worry and stress, which can actually make it harder to see the situation clearly," Kim says. "Sometimes the best action is to do nothing — at least for a little while."



Potential Scenarios: What's Your Best-Case Scenario?

Life transitions can be unsettling, scary and overwhelming. Circumstances that seem hopeless or even jubilant in the moment can unfold in unexpected ways over time. If you don't take the time to focus on what you want to happen with an event, you can lose focus or get hooked into thinking that leads to questionable actions.

One way to put yourself in a constructive state of mind is to visualize your desired outcome. This can be difficult if you are experiencing extreme emotional stress, so wait until you are calm and get the support you need. If your life event is a delightful one, still step back and enjoy the euphoria for a bit. Once you've settled then ask yourself, "What do I want to happen?"

Try to avoid fantastical or unrealistic thoughts such as, "I want to win the lottery so that I can get out of this situation!" Instead, start at the most basic, fundamental level.

When assessing your current life event or transition, it will help to clearly articulate what you want to happen. With your current situation in mind:

- **Must-haves** are the things you cannot move forward without. These are the circumstances that are required for you to have resolution with this situation.
- **Nice-to-haves** are the things you would like to see happen, but that you would be willing to compromise or negotiate.
- **Deal-breakers** are the things that you will not accept under any circumstances. These are the things that you require to change or that you will not agree to. MB

My must-haves are:

My nice-to-haves are:

My deal-breakers are:

Potential Scenarios: What's Your Worst-Case Scenario?

Thinking through potential negative outcomes is a balancing act. On one hand, it can help you prepare for the unexpected by doing things like creating a rainy day fund or talking with your family about an emergency plan. On the other hand, if you only think about the worst-case, you can increase your stress levels by constantly worrying about things that may or may not happen.

Think about an event, either positive or negative, and consider what your worst-case scenario could be.

For example, in thinking about a traditional family gathering, your worst-case may be that your child says or does something embarrassing. And, if this happens, then everyone in the family will remember it for years to come. At future family events, your child (even as a grown adult) will continually be plagued by retellings of the embarrassment and start avoiding the family to escape the anxiety it brings.

Granted, this may be far-fetched. But what can you do to stop such thoughts?

1. Acknowledge the worst-case scenario thoughts. For the event you are envisioning, write down your thoughts.

2. Identify what control you have in the situation. In the example provided, you know you can't control your child's every move, but maybe you can control your reactions to something your child says or does.

3. List out ways to get through your worst-case scenario. Using the example again, you could start talking to your child about feelings, how to handle them, how to handle bullying or even how to handle difficult situations in life.

Section 4: Make a Plan

Manage Money in a Crisis

This course focuses on managing life's transitions and major events. Because the effects can be wide-ranging with respect to your financial planning and your well-being (and the well-being of your dependents), SAM suggests using these guiding principles as a backdrop for making decisions during periods of transition:

- **Control your spending.** Transitions can often put your mindset into a “whatever it takes” approach. If you feel out of control or like you aren't thinking clearly, ask someone you trust to be your second opinion before making big spending decisions. It's OK to ask if you need help managing bill payments and daily spending. You might automate payments to lessen your stress.
- **Continue saving.** Events can and will happen. Keep saving in anticipation of future needs. You also might create auto-transfers to your savings account so that your savings continue to grow without much effort on your part.
- **Avoid new debt if possible.** Be mindful of your borrowing and continue to pay down debts as much as possible.
- **Invest in yourself.** Prioritize your current and future needs. If you deplete your own savings and earnings, then you will not be able to help anyone else.
- **Protect what you have.** Protect yourself and those who depend on you with sound advice and guidance. Insurance and emergency savings can be very helpful in a crisis.

Inventory your resources.

Scan your past.

Use your network.

Manage money in a crisis.



Manage Money in a Crisis

- Control your spending.
- Continue saving.
- Avoid new debt if possible.
- Invest in yourself.
- Protect what you have.

Managing Your Finances as a Caregiver

Lucy found herself financially stressed when she became a caregiver for her parents.

“My mother, Jean, had Alzheimer’s for more than 10 years before she died in the summer of 2015 at the age of 83. My father David, 84, was diagnosed with vascular dementia in autumn 2009, and I continue to visit and care for him at his assisted living home on a regular basis. Caregiving deepened the love I have for each of my parents, but the challenges were bigger than I could have imagined.”

“Because of the length of my parents’ illnesses, my finances became strained. It was easy to push aside and ignore my own financial worries because of the more pressing physical and emotional demands of caregiving.”

“The advice I wish I would have heeded most was my parents’ happy and loving voices before they were sick, reminding me to take care of myself and to give more thought to my own future. If you are starting a journey as a caregiver, my advice to you is to remember that the people who love you most, the very ones you may be caring for, would never ask you to sacrifice your own well-being.”



Refresh Your Financial Knowledge

Visit SAM’s [Money Basics](#) courses to learn more about spending and saving, credit and debt, insurance, investing and employment.

Networks and Communities

When a major transition interrupts your life, talking to a friend or relative who has successfully worked through a similar event can help. Using their experiences and advice, you may feel better equipped to handle the change. But sometimes you may not know what to ask.

If you are facing a specific crisis or life event, investigate support groups and advocacy organizations. Your local community, church, school or workplace might offer meet-ups or you might find support online. Just know that whatever you are going through, it is likely that someone else has been through it before. You are not alone.



Double Check Internet Resources

At the end of this course, you will find a list of reliable resources (by topic) that you can use for a number of life's transitions. If you need to find other resources, be sure you know how to spot credible ones. In a website, check for:

1. **The URL suffix.** Commonly, sites ending in .com are commercial sites, .edu are educational sites, .gov are government, .org are non-profit and .mil are military. However, anyone can publish a site using a suffix that is misleading. Search through the site to check out its legitimacy before trusting it.
2. **Who is the author of the site?** You can generally find this information in the "About" link. Look for specific credentials, other published works, or even search the author's name looking for any other publications or sites.
3. **What kind of information does the site have?** Has it been recently updated? What does it link to, and what links to it? Are other reliable sources used in the writing?
4. **What is the site's purpose?** Evaluate the site to see if it's trying to sell something or really give you advice. For example, some sites related to credit scores want to sell you a service rather than give you information about credit scores.

Tips for Hiring Advisors

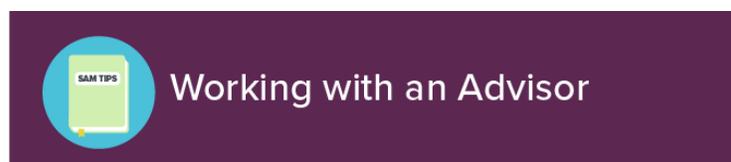
Depending on your circumstances, you might want to hire an attorney, financial advisor, insurance agent, doctor or another type of specialist. Before you sign a contract and begin paying someone for advice, it is important to clarify how they will help you and what exactly you are looking to get out of the arrangement.

Try to find advisors who will help you look at your situation holistically. Especially if you are in a complex situation that crosses many parts of your life (such as deciding when to take your Social Security payouts as you transition to retirement), you will want to get your questions answered before you take action. Some decisions are irreversible. Once you make your move, you can't go back.

When seeking any kind of professional advisor, ask yourself if hiring this advisor would ease your stress, or if it would add more stress. Sometimes it is OK to go it alone.

1. **Conduct informational interviews.** Whenever possible, interview at least three candidates before choosing one. Keep in mind that when you are in a crisis situation, you are more likely to rush into an agreement you might regret later.
2. **Know how they get paid.** Ask them to explain all fees, including administrative charges. Ask them how and when they expect to get paid. If they operate on commission or only represent one product or company, do some comparison shopping before committing to anything. Reputable professionals are willing to have straightforward conversations about the fees they charge. It raises a red flag if someone is glossing over details or not giving you straight answers to your questions.
3. **Ask for references.** Look for certifications and professional associations. Research customer complaints, and ask for testimonials or references from former clients if you need reassurance before signing a deal.

When hiring a financial advisor, follow these guidelines:



- Ask for recommendations from family and friends, then interview at least three financial planners before making a choice.
- Ask for the planner's credentials and licensing in areas such as investment advice, securities or insurance.
- Ask about the person's work experience in financial planning.
- Find out how the advisor keeps on top of the latest trends; regulations change all the time, so current knowledge is important.
- Find out what you can expect regarding the extent of written advice offered, number of meetings, whether you are expected to purchase investments through the planner, etc.
- Ask for references from other clients.
- Discuss how the financial planner will be paid — by commission, fee and commission or fee only.

Build Your Support Network

Look over this list of people, services and professional advisors on this **worksheet**. Put an 'x' to mark whether you need this support now or in the future.

Type of Support / Advisor	I need this help now	I will need this help in the future	I do not need this support
Emergency recovery (food, shelter)			
Attorney / legal advice			
Tax expert			
Doctor / general			
Doctor / specialist			
Nurse / long-term care			
Hospice / end-of-life care			
Physical therapy			
Rehabilitation therapy			
Psychiatrist / psychologist / counselor			
Support group			
Consumer rights advocate			
Insurance agent			
Financial advisor			
Investment broker			
Career counselor			
Headhunter / job services			
Relationship counselor			
Mediator			
Birth center			
Child care			
Elder care			
Pet care / boarding			
Mortgage broker			
Real estate agent			
Apartment finder			
Interior designer			
Contractor / construction			
Handyman / home repairs			
Auto mechanic			
Electrician			
Plumber			
Other:			
Other:			
Other:			

The Power of No

Life's transitions occur in many forms and come about any time – sometimes when we are least prepared for them. The decisions you make throughout a transition can have lasting impacts, so it's important to take time to weigh consequences before making a final decision.

The problem is, often a lot of pressure, stress and chaos surrounds major events. How you and those who depend on you fare depends on your decision-making habits.



1. **Make sure you ask all your questions (even if you don't get all the answers).** Seek help from knowledgeable experts such as doctors, lawyers and financial advisors. Don't be afraid to get second and third opinions.
2. **Make space for your decisions.** Find a quiet place to reflect on the situation, who it affects and what you want to achieve.
3. **Listen to yourself first.** Others will want to give you advice, and it may be helpful. But your belief system, your values and your priorities need to drive your decisions. [SAM's LifeValues quiz](#) can help you reconnect with your values for financial decision-making.
4. **Put your needs and those of your dependents ahead of others.** Remember, you need to be your own advocate in times of change.
5. **Keep your eye on the big picture.** Refer to your list of deal breakers, must haves and nice to haves. Don't get caught up in smaller details in the nice to haves category.
6. **Recognize if and when you need to take action.** Sometimes taking no action at all is the best way to handle a situation. Getting caught up in drama is easy, but doing nothing may be best if the situation really doesn't carry major consequences for you or those who depend on you.

Saying No

Saying no can make you feel guilty, but saying yes to requests that don't align to your values and financial priorities can lead to feeling obligated, resentful or even distrustful. It's OK to say no to someone who thinks he or she is trying to help you. If you don't need or want the help, no is a good answer. Developing your skills is important for those occasions when "no" either buys you time or is simply the correct answer.

Enhance your "no" skills by:

- Realizing that you have a right to set comfortable boundaries for yourself.
- Making the requestor feel heard by explaining truthfully why you are saying no. You don't have to apologize for how you feel.
- Repeating your "no" if it isn't heard the first time.
- Realizing that "no" is a clear and precise answer, whereas phrases like "let me think about it" is ambiguous.

Scan Your Past

When facing a crisis, it is important to take stock of your internal well-being, and to be tender with yourself. You will be able to make the most beneficial decisions when you feel calm and when you are thinking clearly.

You have faced challenges and overcome obstacles before. When you find yourself in a state of flux due to a major event, think about what has helped in the past.

- How have you overcome other life challenges (family, social, financial, professional)?
- Have you previously sought help from an organization or a person?
- When was a time when you felt that a situation turned out for the best? What was the key to success in that situation?
- Who is your role model in handling challenges? What qualities do they possess in times of crisis that you admire? Are they patient? Do they stand up for themselves? Do they have good boundaries?
- Think of a time when a situation you worried about turned out better than expected. If you had known the outcome from the beginning, would you have spent less time worrying? How would you act differently if you knew that your current situation would all turn out for the best in the end?



Honestly thinking through these types of questions and scenarios can help narrow down potential actions as you plot your course through your current life transition.

List Unanswered Questions

Often life transitions are stressful because we don't know what to expect. It can help to hear about others' experiences, but everyone's circumstances are unique, so the chances are slim that you will find someone who has been through your exact situation.

Add to this the emotional charge of a crisis and your mind could be a mess of tangled thoughts and fears.

Once you have taken the time to process your emotions, identified your self-talk and inventoried your resources, you can get down to the raw facts. What do you need to know to move forward?

Start by making a list of all your unanswered questions. There is nothing off limits. You do not have to share this list with anyone unless (or until) you are ready. You might have categories of questions — legal, medical, financial, personal — so don't expect to have all the answers right now.



List your unanswered questions.

What don't you understand?
What don't you know?
What have you assumed (but not confirmed)?
What would help you feel more comfortable?
What would ease your fears?
What specifically do you want others in your life to do to support you?

Identify Barriers

So far this course has focused mostly on your thoughts, feelings and behaviors, but in many life transitions, you will face outside challenges and real barriers.

Once you have clarity about your own perspective, it's time to assess the obstacles in front of you using the strategies from earlier in this course. When you can face these circumstances clearly, you can start to make a plan to take intentional action.

With any obstacle, ask yourself, is this something I have control over? For the things you can't control, you might benefit from letting go of the thought and stopping the worry, at least for the moment.

- **Financial Barriers**

The first step to any money challenge is to get very specific about how much you need. It might be hard to get started, but just the act of writing down all your projected expenses can start to make it feel more manageable. Know your numbers. Write it all down. Then you can start to problem-solve how to tackle it.

- **Relationship barriers**

If you see a particular person or group of people as an obstacle, first separate your observations from your interpretations. Take time to identify exact words, actions and inactions. Resist the urge to blame or judge them. Even if you truly are a victim of injustice, your case will be stronger if you can present it clearly, with evidence, and without bias or emotion. When you're ready, you might talk to the other party on your own, or enlist an objective third party (such as a mediator or trusted friend or family member). It is crucial that any outside person be neutral and that both you and the other person/people trust them to mediate.

- **Personal barriers**

Sometimes you might need help managing your own inner resources in times of change. If your emotions or thoughts feel out of your control, then you must care for yourself before attempting to move forward. If you need help and you don't know where to turn, call 2-1-1 to find local resources in your area or call someone you trust. No matter what you are going through, you do not have to do it alone — especially if you are scared or in extreme emotional pain.

Identify barriers.

What is in your control?

What is out of your control?



Get into Motion

Whether you see them coming or not, you need a way to move forward when changes occur in your life. When you are ready to take action, try these steps:

1. Focus on your must-haves first, especially when it comes to safety or reducing financial impacts.
2. Access any resources that can help you navigate the change immediately.
3. Be flexible and open your mind to alternative solutions.

You may find common actions or resources that can be used in almost any event. Look for these and make note of the most applicable ones for future life events and transitions.



Use the DECIDE Steps

Before making any final decisions, use these guidelines to determine your options, narrow down your choices and evaluate the end result:

DECIDE Steps

- 1** **DEFINE** the problem.
- 2** **ESTABLISH** your criteria.
- 3** **CHOOSE** a few options that match your criteria.
- 4** **IDENTIFY** and compare the pros and cons of each option.
- 5** **DECIDE** the most logical option for your situation.
- 6** **EVALUATE** the results and make adjustments for next time.

Set Your Goals

Goals help manage transitions; however, the changing nature of an event might mean your goal setting is shorter in its term. If you were facing homelessness, for example, your immediate goal may be to secure a place to safely stay for the next few nights while you look for help from local resources. Even if your long-term goal is to have a home, you may need to focus on several shorter goals in the near-term.



Hold Yourself Accountable

It's important not only to have goals, but also to measure your progress toward them. Your goals might be very short term or you may be working on several goals at once. Evaluating your progress will keep you focused on what you need to address next.

Here are some ideas for checking in with your progress:

1. What is the first step you have to take, the second, the third, etc. How will it look when you are finished with that step? What reward will you give yourself when you finish each step?
2. How will you monitor your progress toward longer term goals? What evidence will you have of this progress?
3. What will you do if you have a setback? Will you make adjustments, and who can help you make them?
4. Who else might help you stay on track?

Start small and build on your successes. Let go of guilt or regret over setbacks. Every day is a new opportunity to start again. Even if all you can accomplish today is a 10-minute internet search or a single phone call, that is progress. Use this **Worksheet** to hold yourself accountable.

	Who Can Help Me Keep Track of This Goal?	What's My Back-Up Plan for This Goal?	How Will I Celebrate Reaching This Goal?
What can I do today?			
What can I do this week?			
What can I do next week?			
What can I do this month?			
What can I do in the next three months?			
What can I do in the next six months?			
What can I do in the next year?			

Acknowledge Milestones and Victories

Just as you celebrate age-related milestones, it's important to recognize achievements during a major life event. Especially when the individual achievements seem small, like researching a financial advisor and making an appointment, it is important to acknowledge the progress you are making. Use these questions to help spur ideas:

- What reward will you give yourself to celebrate reaching milestones?
- Who will you tell?
- What will you set your sights on next?

Regardless of what you are going through, it is important to recognize that circumstances are constantly changing. Be gentle with yourself, ask for help and celebrate even the small victories along the way.

Section 5: Conclusion

General Resources

- [SAM's LifeValues Quiz](#)
- **Nonviolent Communication Resources**

To learn more about managing thoughts, feelings and beliefs, research terms such as *nonviolent communication*, *compassionate communication*, and *active listening*.



Adoption, Birth or Family Member Addition

- [Social Security Administration "Social Security Numbers for Children"](#)

Aging, Illness, Disability and Death

- [AARP "What to Do When a Loved One Dies"](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control "Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion"](#)
- [Consumer Financial Protection Bureau "Information for Older Americans"](#)
- [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission "Facts about the Americans with Disabilities Act"](#)
- [LongTermCare.gov](#)
- [MedlinePlus "Coping with Chronic Illness"](#)
- [National Caregivers Library "End of Life Issues"](#)
- [National Institutes of Health "Talking to Your Doctor"](#)
- [Social Security Administration "Benefits for People with Disabilities"](#)
- [Social Security Administration "Disability Benefits"](#)
- [Social Security Administration "Retirement Planner: Plan For Your Retirement"](#)
- [U.S. Social Security Administration "Survivors Benefits"](#)
- [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services "Mourning the Death of a Spouse"](#)
- [U.S. Department of Labor "What You Should Know About Your Retirement Plan"](#)
- [U.S. Department of Labor "Disability Resources"](#)
- [U.S. National Library of Medicine "Bereavement"](#)
- [U.S. Office of Personnel Management "My Annuity and Benefits"](#)
- [VeryWell "Survivor's Checklist After Death"](#)

Natural Disasters

- [American Red Cross "Get Help"](#)
- [Department of Homeland Security "Ready.gov"](#)
- [Federal Emergency Management Agency "Disaster Declarations"](#)
- [Internal Revenue Service "Deducting Casualty, Disaster and Theft Losses at a Glance"](#)
- [University of Minnesota "Recovery After Disaster: The Family Financial Toolkit"](#)

Divorce

- [Federal Planning Association “Create Your Financial Future”](#)
- [Institute for Divorce Financial Analysts “Learning Center: Basics of Divorce, Financial Issues of Divorce, Working with a CDFA, Tax Issues of Divorce”](#)
- [Medline Plus “Divorce”](#)

Family and Money

- [AARP “Should You Give Your Kids a Mortgage?”](#)
- [AARP “The Bank of Mom and Dad”](#)
- [Internal Revenue Service “Frequently Asked Questions on Gift Taxes”](#)

Fraud, Identity Theft and Scams

- [AnnualCreditReport.com](#)
- [Equifax.com](#)
- [Experian.com](#)
- [Federal Deposit Insurance Company \(FDIC\) “Money Smart for Older Adults”](#)
- [Financial Industry Regulatory Authority \(FINRA\) “Protect Your Money”](#)
- [FINRA Broker Check](#)
- [IdentityTheft.gov](#)
- [Social Security Administration “My Social Security Account”](#)
- [TransUnion.com](#)

Housing

- [Center for Responsible Lending “Mortgage Lending”](#)
- [Consumer Financial Protection Bureau \(click Consumer Education\)](#)
- [Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation “consumer Protection Topics – Mortgages”](#)
- [Homeownership Preservation Foundation](#)
- [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\)](#)

Course Conclusion

Congratulations!

You have completed the Life Events and Transitions course. Check out SAM's other free courses to continue your personal finance journey:

SAM Money Basics

These topics form the foundation that underlies most financial decisions. Take all the Basics courses, or jump around to get a refresher based on the choices you face right now.

Employment

Insurance

Investing

Spending and Saving

Credit and Debt

Additional Courses

Explore these SAM courses to develop personalized plans in the following areas:

My Emergency Fund Plan

My Housing Plan

My Transportation Plan

My Financial Well-Being Plan

My Retirement Plan

Disclaimers

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